

# CONTEMPORARY DESIGNS IN HISTORIC CONTEXT: ELEFThERIA SQUARE IN CYPRUS AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN NEW AND THE OLD

Damla MISIRLISOY  

*Faculty of Architecture, Department of Architecture, Near East University, Nicosia, Northern Cyprus, Mersin 10, Türkiye*

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**Abstract.** Contemporary design within a historical context is a special topic of architectural conservation that needs considerations. New designs should be reversible and compatible with existing; however it needs to be legible and distinguishable as well. Creating the compatibility between new and the old is a challenging process. The originality of the heritage should be preserved while adding another layer and value to the heritage.

The international preservation standards and charters provide guideline for contemporary designs in historical settings. The aim of the study is to examine the selected field study by following these principles. Eleftheria square in Cyprus that is designed by Zaha Hadid Architects is the main study area of the paper.

Eleftheria square is a public space located in Nicosia, Southern Cyprus that design has recently completed. It includes design of a moat, which is located next to the historic city walls and designing a bridge that connect the historic part of the city with the new development area. Although the project brought a new life to the neglected part of the city, the design approaches of the project should be examined through conservation principles. Within the scope of the study, the completed project has been examined through preservation principles, which is suggested in selected standards and charters.

**Keywords:** new design in historical settings, conservation principles, international preservation standards, Eleftheria square, Cyprus.

 Corresponding author. E-mail: [damla.misirlisoybugrahan@neu.edu.tr](mailto:damla.misirlisoybugrahan@neu.edu.tr)

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary design within a historical setting is a crucial topic of the preservation field. Different approaches exist in the topic of new designs in historic context in the contemporary conservation approach. New designs can be in harmony with the existing or it can be in totally contrast to it. Which of the two approaches to apply varies depending on the creativity of the designer (Latham, 2000). However, in both case, new designs in historic context should be compatible with the existing instead of being against it. The compatibility of new design with historic context introduces challenge for many cities with focusing on physical design elements (Choi, 2025). Designing in existing context brings certain constraints to the designer but it is one of the most creative works in the field of architecture (Schittich, 2003). New designs in historical settings is challenging in terms of creating a harmony between existing and new architectural language (Yüceer & İpekoğlu, 2012). Experts in heritage field have attempts to accommodate architectural preservation and new buildings in historical settings. New design needs to be compatible but distinct from the existing one. Questioning the meaning of the compadibility is important to achieve successful applications (Khalaf, 2016).

New designs need to be appropriate and compatible to the existing context in terms of materials and details. New work should be differentiated from the existing and reversible (Misirlisoy, 2016). Conserving the authenticity of the existing fabric is important in terms of contemporary conservation approach (Misirlisoy, 2017). Contemporary designs in historic context should follow the principles defined in preservation charters.

New interest in contemporary designs in historic context makes unknown places transformed into major landmarks (Powell, 1999). It takes attraction of the visitors to the area and many countries are using new designs as a strategy to city branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Contemporary designs in historic context is used as a tool for contributing city branding with designs of famaous architects. However, new designs should be taken into consideration in terms of conservation principles. Heritage buildings have a crucial role in the development of cities; however, rapid urbanization process is a critical challenge in terms of architectural heritage conservation (Yang et al., 2024).

Designs of Star architects is used to promote the district and the city although they are inappropriate to the historic context. They become famous with particular signature designs and called Star architects. Their designs can

be a landmark in the city and can be used for promotion of the city. Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster are some of the Star architects that there is a trend to use their designs for attract people to the cities (Niculae, 2016). Experts planning modern projects in historical context are facing challenging historical and spatial conditions (Taraszkievicz et al., 2021).

Cities, as reflections of the lifestyles of different cultures and historical periods, bear witness to historical continuity shaped by change, transformation, and continuity. Cities are in a constant change and in order to survive, they should ensure continuity and learn to adapt to change, since new developments are an inevitable act of a city's transformation (Kurnaz & Aniktar, 2024). However, the city should not loose its characteristics during transformation process.

Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean sea which has always been a 'desired' land due to its significant location. It has hosted many different civilizations throughout history. During these periods, many different buildings and structures were constructed on the island. This is the reason of enriched cultural and architectural heritage of the island.

Walled city of Nicosia is a fortified historical city, which its history dates back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian period. It has a circular form with eleven bastions. The city is divided into two as North and the South right from the middle and today is known as last divided capital of Europe. In the Southern part of the walled city of Nicosia there is a recent project by Zaha Hadid architects including designing the moat as a public space and integrate the new old and new developed part of Nicosia.

The goal of the study is to examine the Eleftheria Square as a new design within a historical context. The Eleftheria Square project has been critically discussed through conservation principles proposed in international preservation principles.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology of the study includes three parts. First step includes in depth analysis on the international preservation standards and charters. The international standards published by UNESCO, ICOMOS and similar organizations were selected. The standards that propose principles for contemporary designs in historic context were searched in depth. Table 1 is prepared as a summary of the preservation principles that used for evaluating new designs in historic context.

As the second step, Eleftheria square is selected as the field study of the research. Observations through site survey were conducted as a part of the method. The observations held in different times and days of the year for observing the use of the public space by the different users.

At the end, Eleftheria square project was evaluated through selected conservation principles. The physical success of the project is discussed in terms of contemporary designs in historic context. Also, the user experience

is discussed through the data collected from observations through site survey.

## 3. International preservation standards and charters

Conserving the values of the heritage assets and transferring them to future generations is important (Mısırlısoy & Günçe, 2015). New design in historic context is a challenging subject that includes different perspectives from different architects and experts (Torres, 2009). A new design in historic context should conserve the architectural character, materials and details (Grimmer & Week, 2012). It can be complicated since there are some limitations and issues such as planning and legal constraints. Circulation, accessibility, structural integrity material choices should be taken into account in the design process. A successful new design in historic context should revitalize and enrich the existing context while adding another value and layer to it. It needs to be a part of the composition rather than a single object placed there (Mornement, 2007). New building in an historic context should respect the proportion of the exiting historical pattern (Yüceer & İpekoğlu, 2012) (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], 2011). Existing standards suggests that new designs should be diffentiated from the existing without defining the balance between differentiation and compatibility (Semes, 2009). Conservation charters ensure preliminary guidance that for developing new designs within existing historic context (Demir & Yüceer, 2025).

The principles provide guideline for contemporary design in historic setting. In Table 1 selected international standards that discuss about the new design in historic settings were analysed in depth. Important principles are represented in Table 1.

Burra Charter suggests that all changes and addition should be reversible and new work needs to be readily identifiable (Australia ICOMOS, 1999). Washington Charter discussed that new work needs to be compatible with the character of the historic town. Also, new buildings should contribute to the enrichment of an area (ICOMOS, 1987) instead of harming the architectural character and identity. Preserving the authenticity should be the main goal and imitations that may harm its historical values should be avoided (ICOMOS, 1972).

Vienna Momerandum highlights the importance of stakeholder participation in the decision making process. Decision-making process in a historic setting requires a sensitive approach that includes stakeholder participation (UNESCO, 2005). Valletta principles discuss that new designs needs to collaborate with the historic setting and urban environment. On the other hand, Leeuwraden Declaration suggests that heritage sites should be understood in wider context as district and city scale. The integration of new designs with the urban environment and urban fabric should be taken into consideration (Leeuwarden Declaration, 2018).

**Table 1.** Summary of conservation principles for contemporary designs in historic context

<b>CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES FOR CONTEMPORARY DESIGN IN HISTORIC CONTEXT</b>	
<b>VENICE CHARTER, 1964</b>	
Article 13	■ The balance between new and old in terms of composition
Article 14	■ Safeguarding integrity of old and new
<b>RESOLUTIONS OF THE SYMPOSIUM ON THE INTRODUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE INTO ANCIENT GROUPS OF BUILDINGS, 1972</b>	
Article 2	■ Contemporary design integrating itself into historic setting without damaging the structural and aesthetic characteristics ■ Using the appropriate mass and scale
Article 3	■ Imitations that would affect heritage values should be avoided
<b>RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING THE SAFEGUARDING AND CONTEMPORARY ROLE OF HISTORIC AREAS, 1976</b>	
Article 28	■ New building adapting harmoniously to the spatial organization and setting of the groups of historic buildings
<b>WASHINGTON CHARTER, 1987</b>	
Article 2c	■ Historic character of the town or urban area should be preserved ■ Material and spiritual elements that express this character should be preserved
Article 8	■ New uses must be compatible with the character of the historic setting
Article 10	■ The existing spatial layout should be respected in terms of scale ■ New elements that are harmony with the existing should be introduced since they may contribute to the enrichment of an area
<b>BURRA CHARTER, 1999</b>	
Article 15.2	■ Any alteration should be reversible and should not prevent future preservation works
Article 22.1	■ New building or addition should be in harmony with existing in terms of siting, bulk, form, scale, character, colour, texture and material ■ Imitation of the old should not be proposed
Article 22.2	■ New building should be identified from the old
<b>VIENNA MOMERANDUM, 2005</b>	
Article 18	■ Contemporary architecture in a historic setting require a historic sensitive approach ■ Authenticity should be preserved and integrity of historic fabric should be ensured
Article 26	■ New design must fit into the particular type of historic pattern
<b>VALETTA PRINCIPLES, 2011 (ICOMOS) The Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas</b>	
4C. Contemporary architecture	■ Contemporary architecture must be coherent with the existing spatial layout in historic towns ■ New design should respect the scale of the site
4D. Public space	■ The balance between public open space and the existing built environment must be ensured
<b>LEEWARDEN DECLARATION: ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF THE BUILT HERITAGE: PRESERVING AND ENHANCING THE VALUES OF OUR BUILT HERITAGE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS, 2018</b>	
Multi-scale and territorial approach	■ Heritage sites should be evaluated and analysed with the surrounding context and their integration into their urban environment should be provided

## 4. Eleftheria Square

### 4.1. History of Eleftheria Square

When Venetian fortifications built in 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were three gates that provide access to the city named as Paphos, Famagusta and Kyrenia Gate. During the Ottoman period of the island there were no expansion outside of the city walls. However, in British Colonial period after the Ottomans, it is decided to have some changes aiming to 'modernise' Nicosia (Ioannou, 2023). After 1879, a wooden bridge was built over the moat to connect the Ledra Street to the new part of the city, aiming to expand the walled city beyond the fortifications.

The new bridge, which is named as Metaxas Square, proposed a new life and movement within the walls (Makrides, 2012). After a while, the new bridge becomes more popular than the other three gates and started to transformed to the main commercial streets of the walled city. In 1974, as a result of a public vote held by Mayor of Nicosia the name of Metaxas Square has been changed to Eleftheria Square (Freedom Square).

### 4.2. Transformation of Eleftheria Square

An international architectural competition was organized in 2005 by Nicosia Municipality and European Union for redesigning the Eleftheria Square. The goal of the project was developing aesthetic image of the public space by



**Figure 1.** Eleftheria Square as a bridge between new and the old (source: Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b)

considering the functionality as well. It is aimed to create spaces for pedestrians for relaxation and social gatherings. Also, the promotion of the historic walls (Figure 1) has been taken into consideration. Zaha Hadid Architects won the architectural competition (Nicosia Municipality, 2005).

Eleftheria square has been designed by Zaha Hadid Architects as a public space located in Nicosia. The project comprises a large public space, which its construction started in 2005 and finished in 2021. The goal of the design is to establish the square as the city's primary meeting space. The project aimed to compose connections from different part of the city and to unite the divided city. Historic city walls separate the historic core of the city from the new part of the city (Figure 2). On the other hand, the 'Buffer Zone' divides the city into two as Northern part and Southern part (Zaha Hadid Architects (2021a).

The completion of the project took almost 16 years due to some archaeological findings that discovered during excavation works in 2009. The project stopped and some modifications to the initial design have been forced in order to protect the archaeological findings Lordou (2019).

Eleftheria square is located near the center of Nicosia, next to historic walls, which surrounds the historic core of the city. The fortifications, which originally built in Lusignan period of the island and rebuilt by Venetian period in 16<sup>th</sup> century, defines the edges of the historic city and divides it from the new districts built around the historic city (Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b).

The project aims to be a catalyst for the reconciliation of the island and the capital. Eleftheria square project transformed the inaccessible spaces of the moat to an urban park with new spaces such as a new plaza, gardens



**Figure 2.** Conceptual diagram of the project (source: Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b)

and promenades (Figure 3). The design proposal offers new public spaces for reconnecting communities of the divided capital (Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b).

The projects propose a bridge that establishes connections with urban fabric and the new public spaces. The square is designed as multifunctional urban space for festivals and public events.

The redevelopment of the area includes two café and new underground parking as a part of the project. Design of the underground carpark aimed to solve historic cities parking issue and prevent parking in the narrow historic streets. The project also involved renovation of the area with archaeological excavations held together preserving historic Venetian walls (Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b).





**Figure 3.** Site plan (source: Zaha Hadid Architects, 2021b)

## 5. Evaluation of Eleftheria Square through conservation principles

After the completion of the project in 2021, the success of the project started to be discussed. The project was criticised in terms of belongingness to the historic context. It was claimed that the project could have been implemented anywhere in the world but the existing historic context and the specific needs of the Nicosia was ignored. The project is a successful move towards local place making within the Nicosia (Ioannou, 2023). The project reduced the traffic and parking problem in the district by reorganizing the whole district in terms of accessibility. The new organization made the square more accessible and pedestrian friendly. The project is implemented universal design principles and making the space accessible for all types of users (Figure 4). However, there are some issues that needs to be discussed in terms of the success of the project.

New designs in historic context require an understanding of contextual sensitivity. Existing context should not be ignored during the design process. In Eleftheria Square case, the historic context, city walls and the needs of Nicosia have been ignored during the design process. The project reflecting the architectural language, style and signature characteristics of Zaha Hadid Architects, however, there is not any inspiration or references from the historic city (Figure 5). Burra Charter suggests that new additions needs to be identifiable as such but also, it needs to be harmony with the existing context.

Another crucial consideration while working in historic context is the material choices and their integration. Burra Charter (1999) suggests that new design is acceptable if its texture and material are compatible with the existing (Australia ICOMOS, 1999). In Eleftheria Square case, concrete

and corian have been used as the primary architectural materials. The choice of concrete and corian is not an appropriate selection since both are not reversible materials. Most of the charters suggest using reversible materials that do not harm the historic structure while removing it.

Also, the integration of new proposed bridge to the historic city walls is not appropriately implemented. Contemporary design should applied into existing setting



**Figure 4.** Ramp for providing access to moat (source: author)



**Figure 5.** Relationship between old and new (source: author)

without damaging its character (ICOMOS, 1972). As seen in Figure 6, some part of the historic wall has been demolished in order to integrate the concrete bridge to the fortification. These interventions are not reversible and it is harming the city walls that belong to 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The suggested bridge should also be discussed in terms of its proportion and scale. ICOMOS (1972) suggests that new designs should be in harmony in terms of scale (ICOMOS, 1972). The scale of the bridge is so huge and it is destroying the perspective of the historic walls. Additions can be allowed, if the balance in composition and its harmony with its neighbourhood is provided (ICOMOS, 1964).

New designs in historic context require contextual sensitivity that means understanding and respecting the historical, architectural and cultural context of the site. Contemporary designs should be in harmony with the historic context and in terms of scale and proportion it should not be over dominate the existing fabric (Üzümcüoğlu & Güvenbaş, 2023).

## 6. Conclusions

The redevelopment of Eleftheria Square undoubtedly had a positive impact on the development of the area. The bridge added over the moat connected the city's historic district with the new development, creating a physical connection. These improvements also triggered further renovations, particularly in the city's new development district, creating a catalytic effect. Abandoned buildings have been renovated and new businesses have been started in the



**Figure 6.** Scale and proportion (source: author)

district. However, when evaluating the project, it must be kept in mind that the project is located in the city's most important historic core. Care should be taken to ensure that the redevelopment enhances the historic structures, rather than overshadowing or competing with them. International conservation regulations should be utilized when preparing new building projects within a historical context.

Although the Eleftheria Square project has had many positive impacts on the city, several problems have been identified when evaluated within the context of the new design within its historical context. The newly added bridge presents a significant scale problem when compared to the historical fabric. The massive bridge obscures all perspectives of the city walls, and some damage to the historical fabric has been observed at the points where the bridge and the historic city walls connect.

New design in historical settings is an argumentative topic in the field of conservation. Creating harmony between existing and new design is a challenge for the designer in the design process. However, when the new design respects the conservation principles, it adds another layer and value to the historic layer. It creates attraction to the district and makes the area unique.

Legibility in new designs is important and the new design should be differentiated with the old. However, harmony with the existing is also required. New designs should preserve the originality of the existing and respect it. Especially, in the last decades, visually attractive buildings, which we can call signature buildings designed by Star Architects such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libesking, etc., have begun to be built in order to create center of attention and to play a major role in promoting the city identity. However, this influence to the city can be negative and positive depending on the case.

These buildings are seen as a political and symbolic interest in promoting the city and revitalizing the unattractive areas of the district. However, contemporary designs should not damage the identity of the cultural heritage and the city. Unfortunately, there is a lack of bridge between local regulations and international conservation charters. While

designing in historic context, international preservation standards should be followed. These international conservation principles should be followed by local regulations. The study highlights crucial conservation principles that can be guidance for designers while working in historic context.

## Disclosure statement

There is no any competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties.

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